

8 What Is the People of God? (An Answer in Images)¹

Chapter 7 considered the way unfolding circumstances kept changing what it meant to be the people of God. It was a diachronic or historical study. This chapter, looks at the question more synchronically or canonically and asks what impression the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the "Writings," conveys of what it means to be the people of God.

1 One People, a Worshipping Congregation

Israelite worship moves between the triad of prayer and teaching in the family or in other small groups, the priestly round of sacramental worship in the temple, and the whole people's celebration of great pilgrim festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkot. In the Writings, the individual lament psalms likely presuppose family or small group worship as the context in which people prayed for healing or restoration. The regular round of temple worship is a focus in the narrative of Chronicles: for instance, Hezekiah's restoration of the temple and its worship (2 Chr 29; 31). The festivals are celebrated by the whole people together (e.g., 2 Chr 30; Neh 8:13-18), partly to safeguard the orthodoxy of their observance. The community worship offered at local sanctuaries is deprecated, perhaps mainly because of its syncretistic associations (e.g., 2 Chr 31:1-3).

The worship of the Psalms itself has commonly been thought to have three facets.² It involves praise in response to who God is and how God works, lament and plea in the context of God's not being and acting in the way Israel would expect, and public testimony when God turns back and once more acts in faithfulness and power. It is in such worship that Israel thus discovers, expresses, and grows in its faith.

The praise of the Psalms belongs especially "in the congregation of the committed [*khasidim*]" (Ps 149:1), and perhaps specifically in the context of the great pilgrim festivals. These recall different acts of God on Israel's behalf; they also celebrate God's kingship and grace as creator and rejoice in the gifts of creation. This praise involves both unrestrained exuberant honoring of Yahweh as king, and bowed prostration before the creator who deigns to be "our God" (see Ps 95). In Israel's worship ritual form, orthodox belief, awed reverence, and joyful hope appear together as essential features of Israel's relationship with God, without any sense of tension (e.g., Pss 22; 147:11; 1 Chr 15:25-28; 2 Chr 30:13-27; Ezra 3).

Such worship is world-creating. Against the perceptible world it sets one which is characterized by justice, truth, and meaning because it belongs to Yahweh. It declares this world more real and powerful than the perceptible

¹ First published as "Images of Israel in the Writings" in *Studies in Old Testament Theology* (David Hubbard Festschrift, ed. R. L. Hubbard and others; Dallas: Word, 1992), pp. 205-21.

² See, e.g., W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

world and invites its participants to live in it as the more real of the two worlds, and thereby to make it so.³

The lament of the Psalms belongs in the context of gatherings for prayer on the part of the community as a whole in the context of crises such as famine and defeat, and gatherings of smaller groups to pray with individuals in their personal crises.⁴ Lamentations also models the communal prayer that lays hold on Yahweh in the experience of disaster; acknowledgment of sin is sometimes a feature of it (cf. Dan 9; Ezra 9; Neh 1; 9). The temple is especially a place of prayer. As a place where Yahweh dwells, it is also a place toward which people pray, especially when their failure in relation to God has brought them defeat, deprivation, loss, and exile; in such contexts, self-humbling, prayer, seeking of God's face, and turning from wrong ways will meet with a response from the God who will hear, forgive, vindicate, and heal (2 Chr 6:18-40; 7:12-16; also the intercession of 2 Chr 30:18-20; Dan 6:10-11).

The Psalms' testimony issues from the acts of deliverance that bring such crises to an end. The normal pattern of Israel's life with Yahweh comprises calling on Yahweh, experiencing Yahweh's deliverance, and glorifying Yahweh as its deliverer as it fulfills the promises made in the midst of its prayer (Pss 50:14-15; cf. 65:1-3 [2-4]). The deliverance of the individual also draws the congregation as a whole into the grateful confession that glorifies Yahweh (Ps 22:22-27 [23-28]). Thus one makes one's confession "in the company of the upright, in the assembly" (Ps 111:1). Material offerings accompany and give costly support to praise, plea, and testimony. Joyful communal feasting is a natural concomitant when people make offerings of animals and crops to Yahweh. One of the joys of the powerless when restored from affliction is to rejoin the feasting of the worshipping congregation (Ps 22:26 [27]).

Chronicles is fond of noting that worship and other activities involve "all Israel." It emphasizes that Israel never wholly lost the form in which it began, the twelve-clan unit. All these clans are equal, but some are more equal than others: the entire story of Israel's origins led to the choice of Judah. That might glorify Judah, but it might also warn it to be careful lest it fall, as Ephraim had fallen (Ps 78:9-11; cf. the argument of Rom 11:20-21). Judah cannot take its position for granted. It was all Israel that had lived a life of recurrent rebellion and experience of God's grace (Ps 78:12-66). That might also hint that the merciful God has not yet finished even with Ephraim.

In Chronicles, the story of the northern kingdom after its separation from Jerusalem is not part of Israel's story, and cooperation with the northern kingdom is a dangerous enterprise (2 Chr 20:35-37). But people in the north retain the potential to return to a relationship with Jerusalem and thus a proper relationship with Yahweh (2 Chr 11:13-17; 15:9-15; 30:1-27). The story of Israel's origins in 1 Chr 1 - 9 gives an honored place to exploits of northern clans, the story of the establishment of the monarchy and the worship of Jerusalem is told to show that these belong as much to the north as to the south, and the subsequent story shows that the division between north and south was never absolute.⁵

³ Cf. W. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 6-53.

⁴ Cf. E. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 14.

Israel's oneness also extends through the generations. Chronicles has a strong concern to link Israel's ancestors, the First Temple community, and the Second Temple community, not least via the pattern, the place, and the equipment of its worship. The belief that the worship of Jerusalem inherits the varied traditions of Israel further buttresses the conviction that it stands as Israel's one worship resource. Horeb (2 Chr 5:10), Shiloh (1 Chr 9:5), Gibeon (1 Chr 9:35-44; 16:37-42) and Moriah (2 Chr 3:1) all come together on Mount Zion. The wilderness sanctuary and its altar (1 Chr 21:29 - 22:1; 2 Chr 1:4-6) and the covenant chest (1 Chr 13; 2 Chr 6:41) find their place in the temple. Zadokites, Levites, and prophets all take part in its ministry. Communities that might value varying traditions are invited to see all as fulfilled in Jerusalem; they can and must make it their center.

Israel as an entirety stands within God's historical purpose. The history of Israel often threatens to break down, but never actually does so. God's grace in the past is a basis on which to trust in such grace for the future, though the fragility of the community's sense of link with the past is hinted in Ezra 3. The story emphasizes continuity with Moses, with David, and with the period immediately before the exile (Ezra 3:2, 10, 12). It also records the weeping that accompanied joy, which might denote tears of joy or might indicate that the people celebrating the occasion sensed discontinuity with the past as well as continuity (Ezra 3:12-13).

Israel is Abraham's offspring, Jacob's children (Ps 105:6-11, 42): as such they have been protected, provided for, increased, and released (Ps 105:12-41), and therefore are called to obedience (Ps 105:45). The trouble is that as well as being one in God's giving over the generations, Israel is one in its own waywardness over the generations, a oneness in disloyalty, insubordination, and blasphemy in the face of God's giving (of promise, deliverance, rule of life, provision, territory, preservation). In its prayer (e.g., Neh 9) implicitly it pleads for the divine consistency to keep overcoming the human consistency, so that the pattern of grace, sin, loss, and restoration may never falter at the third stage. Explicitly it asks God not to make the ancestors' failures a basis for later judgment (Ps 79:8). One generation is not punished for an earlier generation's sin; if it turns back to God from waywardness it can be forgiven and healed (2 Chr 7:14). Retribution is not an inexorable principle. Each generation stands before God with an open future, responsible for its own destiny.⁶

2 A Family Community

The idea of seeking and valuing solitariness is alien to the First Testament; even in their individual prayers and praises people speak from within a rich community heritage and as members of the community.⁷ The

⁵ Cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1977), pp. 89-140.

⁶ See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962) 1:349.

⁷ H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1974), p. 217; cf. H. Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), pp. 20-26; H.-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 138-41.

individual's hurt arises not least from being rejected and alone, "scorned by the people" and attacked by a "group of evildoers," people who belong to the same community and fellowship (Pss 22:6, 16 [7, 17]; 25:16; 55:12-14 [13-15]; 102:6-7 [7-8]). The individual abjures membership of a community of evildoers, in preference for membership of the community that worships Yahweh (Ps 26:5, 12). Survival (and even triumph) issues in part from seeing oneself in the context of a cloud of witnesses who have proved God in the past, of a supporting, worshipping community before which the sufferer testifies to God's responsiveness in the present, and of another "people" who will still confess Yahweh on the basis of such testimony in the future (Pss 22:3-5, 22-25, 30-31 [4-6, 23-26, 31-32]; 35:27; 42:4 [5]). The interdependence of individual and community is thus important to the individual, but also to the community itself. It shares in the blessing of the individual's experience of deliverance as it joins in the response of praise (Pss 30:4 5]; 31:23-24 [24-25]; 32:11; 40:9 [10]).

The community is one that cares. Its vision is that all should have enough – indeed plenty – and that none should cry out in distress (Ps 144:12-15). It declares a blessing on people who do care about the powerless, feeble, and insignificant rather than despising them (Ps 41). Its vision is for a community that weeps with the weepers and rejoices with the joyful (Pss 34:3 [4]; 35:12-13). It knows that moral considerations determine whether someone can dwell on God's hill or join the circle of those who seek Yahweh's face (Pss 15; 24). Joyful praise is appropriate to the just or upright because the words and deeds of the one they praise are characterized by justice and uprightness (Ps 33:1-5). Thus "properly conceived, the Temple is a place of electrifying holiness that cannot tolerate injustice." The cultic and the ethical are "two sides of the same experience."⁸

Sometimes the vision just referred to meets no realization. Elimelech's community experienced famine, loss, and displacement (Ruth 1), though his family's story also illustrates the way the community can care for its weak (Ruth 2). The weepers can have their pain exacerbated rather than relieved by the response of their community (Pss 42:3, 9-10 [4, 10-11]; 43:1-2). Worse than that, the community (or elements within it) is often characterized as wicked, recalcitrant, godless, mischievous, greedy, murderous, thieving, adulterous, oppressive, arrogant, scoffing, trusting in worldly resources, deceitful, and foolishly self-deceived (Pss 1; 5; 35; 36; 50; 52; 55). It knows conflict within as well as without. Power within it lies with the perjurious, the haves, the taunting, who stand over against the righteous, the godly, the committed (to God and to others), the covenant-keeping and Torah-delighting, who are powerless, fearful, fleeing, vengeful, vulnerable, groaning, with God's promise all they have to trust in. In another sense the wicked belong only formally to the community. The real Israel is the community of the just (Ps 1:5). Widow, alien, and orphan comprise the people of Yahweh (Ps 94:5-6).

In part the expectation that Israel should behave as a community is based on a vision of Israel as a family of brothers and sisters. This image is implicit in the genealogies that are a prominent feature of the Writings, though these also likely reflect the power-struggles and identity-crises of the Second Temple community. They indicate that like any family, Israel has its family arguments. The image is explicit when all Israel's "kindred" join in

⁸ J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), pp. 170, 172.

great festive events (1 Chr 12:39; 13:2; 28:9). It is the basis for prophetic appeal and rebuke (2 Chr 11:4; 28:9-15), but in such situations straight talking within the family can lead to matters being sorted out, and even issuing in worship (Neh 5).

3 A National State, a Warring Army

In the Writings Israel is a state when the story opens; sanctuary and monarchy are of more dangerously unequivocal and mythical significance than is the case in the Torah and the Prophets. As a nation Israel is a territorial entity, by the inalienable gift of Yahweh (Pss 135:12; 136:21-22; 1 Chr 28:8). When people do not enjoy the land as their ancestors had (Neh 9:36-37), the affirmation that it is their secure possession is the more important. On the other hand, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther witness to the possibility of full life and political success in continuing dispersion.

As a nation Israel has a capital, which is the location of its sanctuary but is in its own right a place of fortified strength, material prosperity, and architectural splendor. The restoring of its walls and population is calculated both to bring its disgrace to an end and to improve its security (Ps 122:3; Neh 2:17; 7:1-4; 11:1-2). Jerusalem is the center of the nation's life. To Israel's rest in its country there corresponds Yahweh's rest in Zion after wandering (Ps 132; 1 Chr 28:2; 2 Chr 6:41). Indeed, the country is Yahweh's place of rest first; only because it is that can it become Israel's (Ps 95:11).⁹

As a nation Israel has a leadership structure. Israel is both a theocracy, a kingdom over which Yahweh reigns, and a monarchy, a kingdom over which a human ruler reigns. The Davidic kings sit on Yahweh's throne reigning over Israel on Yahweh's behalf; Yahweh's kingdom lies in their power and will always do so (1 Chr 17:13-14; 28:5; 29:23; 2 Chr 9:8; 13:5, 8). David is made king in fulfillment of Yahweh's word concerning *Israel* (1 Chr 11:10). He is important for Israel's sake rather than vice versa (1 Chr 14:2). By Yahweh's power he experiences victory over his enemies (Ps 18:46-48 [47-49]), but like the rest of Israel he moves between weakness, fear, abandonment, and grief, and joy, confidence, strength, and acceptance (Pss 5; 6). The difficulty is that all leadership, which theoretically exists for the sake of those it leads, easily comes to be important in its own right. Psalms and Chronicles witness to a growing gap between people and king and a shrinking gap between king and God (Ps 45:6 [7]). In theory worship of the one true God relativizes all other powers. "But what happens if one earthly norm becomes excluded from the relativization of all that is mundane?"¹⁰

Chronicles expresses no explicit hope regarding the future of the suspended monarchy. This silence has been variously interpreted. Since Daniel is more overtly concerned for the future and its visions give a prominent place to earthly kings and to Yahweh's kingship, but it also expresses no hopes concerning Israel's own monarchy, its silence is less equivocal. In Dan 7 sovereignty is taken from four animals and given to a human-like figure; the animals stand for human kings, but the entity that

⁹ On this idea see G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 94-102, though he is critical of the Chronicler.

¹⁰ Cf. P. D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), p. 122

apparently corresponds to the human-like figure is not another king but “holy ones on high” or “holy people on high,” who in some sense represent Israel.

As a nation Israel is also a body involved in political relations with other nations over which it is destined to exercise authority. Its existence is lived like that of other nations in its world and it is often in conflict with local peoples (some ethnically or religiously related) and with more distant imperial powers that might be a military or political threat (see Pss 46; 83; Ezra 4 - 5; Neh 2; 6). It prays as a political entity under pressure from enemies without as well as from enemies within (e.g., Pss 53; 54; 59).

Functioning as an army follows from being a nation. When Israel is under attack, Yahweh is the shield around Israel protecting it, or the stronghold or fortress hiding it, or the one whose aide surrounds it with a military camp, or the savior who arises in its midst to rescue it at the critical moment (Pss 2:11; 5:11-12 [12-13]; 34; 46; 125:2; 144:2). In success the plunder of battle belongs to God, so David’s victories provide the resources for building the temple. The actual temple-builder is to be not the bloodstained warrior (like sexual intercourse war involves ritual stain) but his son whose name marks him as a man of rest and in whose reign Israel will experience quiet and peace (1 Chr 22:8-9). Yahweh the warrior teaches Israel to fight (Ps 144:1) and uses Judah and Ephraim as baton and helmet (Ps 60:7 [9]) but war is destined to cease because Yahweh’s purpose to subject the nations is destined to be achieved (Ps 46). The Writings’ contrary attitudes to war are familiar in the modern world: it is better to be at peace than at war but it is better to be dead than red and it is necessary to fight with relish when that seems the only way to achieve your destiny.

While the offensiveness of David’s census (1 Chr 21) may lie in its implicit trust in human military resources, foresight over fortification, resources, and defense is affirmed where these combine with urgent prayer, trust in Yahweh, and action “in Yahweh’s name,” as Yahweh’s representatives (2 Chr 13 - 15). The most splendid - even baroque - embodiment of these attitudes appears in the story of Jehoshaphat’s battle with peoples from the east (2 Chr 20).¹¹ The people seek Yahweh, fast, and lament; through a Levite Yahweh urges them not to fear, reminds them that the battle belongs to God, and gives them their battle instructions (which amount to an invitation to watch Yahweh act); the people bow down to worship and the Levites stand up to praise; Jehoshaphat appoints a choir that sings while Yahweh sets an ambush involving the hostile armies self-destructing. The story ends with plunder, worship, astonishment on the part of the nations, and a period of quiet rest. Psalm 149 provides a lyric for this remarkable holding together of worship and warmaking, Psalm 18 a testimony to deliverance of this kind, and Psalm 47 a witness to the expectation that the nations will indeed come to acknowledge that God subdued peoples under Israel. The view that Chronicles’ attitude is superseded by Jesus has not generally been held by Christians. Oliver Cromwell’s troops and many others have sung Psalms before battle and levitical chaplains still accompany the armies of “Christian” nations.¹²

¹¹ See G. von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 129-31

¹² See R. E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (London/New York: Nelson, 1903), pp. 228-36.

4 Yahweh's Flock, Yahweh's Possession, Yahweh's Servant

Israel is a flock provided for, rested, pastured, led, watered, refreshed, protected, and reassured by its shepherd (e.g., Pss 23; 95:7). The more general theme of Israel as a people under Yahweh's protection finds paradoxical expression in Esther. The story vividly portrays the reality of the world's pressure on Israel's very existence, and of Israel's miraculous survival and triumph. It provides the strongest scriptural assertion of the significance of ethnic Israel, one that Christian theology has often failed to come to terms with.¹³ It is the one book in the First Testament that resists Christian supersessionism absolutely, as Luther saw, and one that the holocaust might take from the periphery of the canon to its center.¹⁴ Jews once more lament the way the nations seek to destroy them, but the response to their lament comes not (explicitly) through an act of God but through an act of a woman, and one who had concealed her Jewishness.¹⁵ The result is not the exaltation and the reverential fear of Yahweh by people, but the exaltation of Mordecai and the abject fear of the Jews by people.

All peoples owe allegiance to Yahweh as creator and lord, but Israel is Yahweh's particular inalienable possession (*nakhalah*), Yahweh's valued personal property (*segullah*, a word sometimes used for "treasure") (Pss 33:12; 106:5; 135:4; cf. 28:9; 74:2; 78:62, 71; 94:5, 14; 106:40). If Israel is merely the part of the world over which Yahweh more overtly exercises sovereign rights at the moment, this in itself makes Yahweh's acts in Israel significant for other peoples. These acts are designed to enable the whole world to acknowledge the way Israel's God can deliver, and to do so with joy because this God also governs and guides all peoples (Pss 47; 66; 67). Israel's was not a missionary faith, but it was a faith which made universal claims.¹⁶

To put the point more centripetally, the peoples of the world are expected to gather together to worship in Jerusalem, declaring the praise of Yahweh as the one who hears and liberates the doomed and stripped captives (Ps 102:15-22). All the peoples of the earth in their apparent glory but actual fragility will pay attention and come to worship Yahweh as their sovereign (Ps 22:27-29 [28-30]). The story of Ruth encapsulates that purpose in a vignette, while Chronicles also notes the place of foreigners in the story and worship of Israel (1 Chr 2; 2 Chr 6:32-33; 30:25; cf. Ezra 1:1-11; 6:1-5). "What can one say about the self-consciousness of a provincial cultic community tolerated by the Persian Empire which yet portrays history from Adam onwards as taking place all for her own sake?"¹⁷

¹³ Cf. W. Vischer, "The Book of Esther," *Evangelical Quarterly* 11 (1939): 3-21 (the date is significant); B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1979), p. 606.

¹⁴ See E. L. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990), pp. 62, 90.

¹⁵ See S. A. White, "Esther," in P. L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), pp. 166-73.

¹⁶ Cf. R. Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), pp. 54-60; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 207-8.

¹⁷ G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962) 1:347.

To say that Yahweh chose Israel is thus not to say that other peoples are rejected. Within Israel Yahweh especially chose Levi, Judah and David for particular purposes (Ps 78:68, 70; 1 Chr 15:2; 28:4-6; 2 Chr 6:5-6; 29:11). This was more for the sake of the people as a whole than in rejection of the people as a whole. The same dynamic underlies the choice of Israel. It belongs in the context of Yahweh's will to be sovereign deliverer of the world as a whole, and it serves that end. There can be no ideological appropriation of belief in election.

Chosenness thus belongs with servanthood. As Yahweh's servant (Ps 136:22) Israel is called to obedience and trust as well as worship. A servant has a special relationship with a master or mistress and can rely on the latter's care and protection, and also one who is committed to do as the master or mistress directs. This trust and commitment stem from being in covenant relationship with a master whereby the latter promises to look after the servant's future and the servant is committed to obeying the master (cf. Ps 89:39; Ps 119). Israel is thus a people covenanted to be Yahweh's people (2 Chr 23:16; 34:29-33). It is the company of the committed (*khasidim*; Pss 50:5; 85:8 [9]; 97:10). Covenanting with other gods or other peoples is disallowed and disapproved because it indicates reliance on resources other than Yahweh (2 Chr 16:1-12; 25:5-13; 28:16-25; Ezra 8:21-23; cf. Ps 40:4 [5]).

The covenanted people is challenged to express its dependence on God and its commitment to God in simple worship and moral uprightness (Ps 50). Israel has known Yahweh releasing its back from its burdens: it is now expected to bow down to Yahweh and no other gods and to walk in Yahweh's ways, and it is invited to look to Yahweh alone for the satisfying of its needs and for deliverance from its pressures (Ps 81). In the Psalms Israel is challenged to trust in Yahweh, delight in Yahweh, commit its way to Yahweh, relax before Yahweh, wait for Yahweh, hide in Yahweh. If it does so and combines that with a commitment to walking in Yahweh's way, it will live long in possession of its country, enjoy security and prosperity there, be upheld and prevented from falling headlong, see the wicked off and be vindicated itself, have its deepest desires fulfilled and see its posterity (Ps 37; cf. Ps 33:18-22). The narratives in 2 Chr 10 - 36 illustrate the life of Israel lived in trust and obedience - or not. In due course freedom from Yahweh takes Israel into servitude and exile (Lam 1:3), which continues in the Second Temple period in a bondage to Persian overlords (Neh 9:36-37).

Loyal servants "seek" the master, aim to attend on the master with loyalty, commitment, and energy, in a way that opposes anything conflicting with the master's interests (1 Chr 28:9 and 2 Chr 31:21, where service and seeking are linked; also 1 Chr 22:19; 2 Chr 7:14; 14:4, 7; 15:2-4, 12-15; 17:3-4; 20:3-4; 34:3). They try to draw each other into fuller or renewed commitment to their master's service (2 Chr 17:7-9; 19:4; 29). They seek the master where he may be found (2 Chr 11:16); failure here is one basis for regarding the worship of northern Israel as illicit (2 Chr 13:8-11). Worship itself is one way of serving God (see Ps 102:22 for the verb); service of God is expressed in worship services, and in reforming the temple Hezekiah restores the service of Yahweh's house (2 Chr 29:35). Such seeking of Yahweh is thus the opposite of apostasy or trespass (*ma'at*), a way of worship or life that ignores Yahweh's rights and defers to other gods, by seeking them rather than Yahweh, or by introducing their way of worship into worship of Yahweh,

or by associating too closely with their worshippers (1 Chr 10:13-14; 2 Chr 28:22-25; 33:19; 36:13-14; Ezra 9:2; 10:2-3). It involves doing what one likes and ignoring Yahweh's revealed way (2 Chr 12:1-2; 26:16-18; 28:19; 29:19; 36:14).¹⁸

Psalms 95, the classic psalm of praise already referred to, moves on from enthusiasm and prostration to testing interrogation, not by Israel but of Israel. Israel's voice is silenced by that of another voice challenging it to listen to God's voice. When Israel celebrated Sukkot, it celebrated the giving of the Torah, but the question was whether rejoicing in the Torah was only a matter of heart and lips and not of life. Israel is a community instructed in the Torah and committed in covenant to making the Torah its rule of life (Ezra 7 - 10; Neh 8 - 10). There is nothing intrinsically legalistic about Israel's commitment to live by the Torah. Joy in Yahweh and obedience to the Torah happily coexist in Ps 119, and Nehemiah encourages the people towards this combination when they are inclined to grief on discovering teaching in the Torah which puts them to shame (Neh 8:9-12).

5 A Crushed Remnant, an Exclusive Sect, a Theological School

Israel is a vine planted to flourish in ground Yahweh prepared for it, but a vine from time to time unprotected, ravaged, and cut down (Ps 80). Israel as a people is given up to subjection, death, exile, plundering, and shame (Ezra 9:7). It is rejected, abased, defeated, spoiled, slaughtered, scattered, discarded, taunted, shamed, broken, forgotten, cast off, oppressed, resourceless, and powerless, like a bird at the mercy of predators (Pss 44; 74:19, 21). The people of holy ones is subject to oppression and attack by mighty kings (Dan 7:21; 8:24-25). Loyalty to Yahweh seems to stimulate suffering rather than evade it (Dan 11). Jerusalem is like a lonely widow, a serf, let down, disillusioned, weeping, betrayed, homeless, distressed, overwhelmed, desolate, bereft, defeated, dishonored, helpless, mocked, despised, fallen, comfortless, desecrated, hungry, despised, uncared for, trapped, stunned, crushed (Lam 1). In exile Israel weeps and remembers, is taunted and voiceless, reminds and looks for judgment (Ps 137). The people is a mere remnant of what it once was (Ezra 9:13-15). All that remains in Jerusalem or in dispersion is a group of survivors (Ezra 1:4; Neh 1:2-3).

The experience of being turned into a mere remnant can come despite the fact that Israel lives in loyalty to the covenant and shapes its life by Yahweh's ways (Ps 44:17-26 [18-27]). But this is not always so. Whereas the ideal Israel lives in trust and obedience, the actual Israel does no such thing, and is cut down to size in the way appropriate to a servant who fails. From the beginning Israel forgets, rebels, hustles, craves, tests, envies, forsakes, despises, disbelieves, grumbles, disobeys, abandons, angers, provokes, compromises, nauseates (Ps 106). Jerusalem falls because it has become disobedient, sinful, rebellious, careless, polluted (Lam 1). Israel has failed, gone astray, done wrong, rebelled, trespassed, turned its back on Yahweh's commands, ignored Yahweh's prophets, and refused to turn from its waywardness (Dan 9). Moral and religious failure is a reality of both past and present (Ezra 9). Whereas Israel was designed to be a people where the kingship of God was a reality and thus to be a microcosm of what the world

¹⁸ On *ma'al* see J. Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), pp. 16-35.

was called to be, it had rejected Yahweh's kingship and become a microcosm of what the world also is, and was therefore judged as such.¹⁹

It is a sign of God's grace that Israel survives at all with a toehold in its country and is able to feel encouraged that it experiences a little reviving even as it has to live under the authority of foreign kings (Ezra 9:8-9). Israel has escaped its enemies like a bird escaping a trap; if Yahweh had not been on Israel's side its enemies would have quite devoured it (Ps 124). The history of rebellion never ends in Israel's annihilation, because saving Israel reveals Yahweh's power, because leaders such as Moses and Phinehas intervene on their behalf, standing between them and Yahweh's wrath, because Yahweh could not but hear their cry and remember the covenant relationship with them, because saving them could lead to testimony and glory (Ps 106). They are a people grieved for and prayed for, confessed for and argued for (Neh 1:4-11). As the preserved remnant they are then challenged to be the responsive remnant (Ezra 10; Neh 9).

It is the Writings that contain much of the Hebrew Bible's material reflecting Israel's openness to learning from the world (in Proverbs) and reflecting Yahweh's purpose for the whole world (in Psalms and Ruth). They also contain much of its material that expresses an inclination to separate oneself from the world and from other groups that worshipped Yahweh, especially in Ezra-Nehemiah. The later controversies underlying Dan 7 - 12 also reflect the conflict between different groups within the community in Judea such as the party led by Tobias over against that led by Onias.²⁰

Something of the theological rationale for exclusivism emerges from the crisis over "marrying out" in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The theological issue is expressed as a concern for holiness rather than pollution (Ezra 9:10-14) and for people not to lose the ability to speak Hebrew (Neh 13:24). Ezra requires the annulment of many mixed marriages (Ezra 10), but there were broader senses in which the people were expected to distance themselves from other local people as part of their commitment to observing the Torah, including observance of the sabbath, a distinguishing mark of a true Yahwist as Nehemiah sees it (Neh 10:28-29 [29-30]; 13:15-22). The Torah set ethnic limits on who could belong to Yahweh's congregation; people needed to be able to prove their genealogical right to membership of Israel, of the clan of Levi, and of the priestly line (Ezra 2), and many people of foreign descent were expelled from the community (Neh 13:1-3). Even the stories in Daniel that envisage Jews successfully involved in imperial politics stress the need for boundaries that preserve Jewish purity and avoid pollution (Dan 1:8). Israel is called to be the holy people of the holy God (cf. Ezra 9:2).²¹

The narrowness of the Second Temple community should not be exaggerated: anyone who had broken with the pollution of the other nations in the country was welcomed to join in the worship of Yahweh (Ezra 6:21; cf. Neh 9:2). Nevertheless the attitude of a leader such as Nehemiah makes us

¹⁹ See chapter 7, §4, above.

²⁰ Among adventurous attempts to trace the development of the parties in Second Temple Judaism are M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York/London: Columbia UP, 1971/London: SCM, 1987); P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

²¹ Cf. D. Bossman, "Ezra's Marriage Reform," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 9 (1979): 32-38 (p. 36).

feel uneasy. It may yet be that his exclusivism made it possible for Israel to survive. The Second Temple community was beginning a new life, “trapped between a political and religious sense of identity” and encouraged by its political overlords to develop as a religious community, so that it necessarily had to define the nature and the boundaries of its own identity if it was to be able to maintain the distinctive witness to God for which it had been chosen.²²

“The recovery of ethnic rootage and the special histories of pain... may help us see that an alternative perception of reality is not simply a defensive measure but may be an act of identity, energy, and power.” It may challenge the claims of the dominant reality. Admittedly it may fall into the trap of defensively keeping its alternative perception to itself lest this truth be contaminated, rather than openly making it available to the dominant community. We do not know enough about the communities of the Second Temple period to be able to offer an independent evaluation of Ezra-Nehemiah’s stance in relation to them, but the problem of assimilation to a powerful surrounding culture arises at both ends of the biblical period: Israel repeatedly experienced its conversation partners “as having a more fully adequate hermeneutic, rationality, or way of experiencing the world” and needed to be wary of their beguiling if it was to keep alive its distinctive memory.²³

There is no mention of Israel in Proverbs (except Prov 1:1), Job, Song of Songs, or Ecclesiastes. Evidently Israel (like God) does not always need mention in theology; perhaps the servant status of Israel reaches its apogee when it can survive or even affirm its own dispensability. These books nevertheless emerge from the life and experience of Israel. Their theological concern suggests the image of Israel as a theological school. They bare the fruit of Israel’s reflection on everyday questions about how to live in a way that is both successful, godly, and moral, and on major theological issues concerning revelation, the nature of God, and the basis of God’s relationship with human beings. This theological school belongs within the life of the believing community. Solomon is its patron, as (with some irony) the great embodiment of God-given wisdom in the Former Prophets.

Israel is drawn to a theology that holds together confident affirmation and bold questioning. Confident affirmation is the dominant feature of Proverbs and the Song of Songs; limitations and ambiguities are the dominant feature of Job and Ecclesiastes, which focus on the degree to which the orthodoxies and promises of Proverbs and the Song of Songs do not work out for people.²⁴ Between them they enable Israel’s theological school to avoid both the Scylla of simplistic triumphalism and the Charibdis of despairing agnosticism.

The wisdom of the Writings often profits from the wisdom of the world. But their conviction is that Israel’s wisdom nevertheless quite outclasses that of the world. The young Judean youths enrolled in theological school in Babylon not only maintain their purity but prove wiser than their teachers in

²² See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), pp. 159-60.

²³ See W. Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 46-48, 54, though Brueggemann does not apply his observation to the Second Temple community. See also Hanson, *The People Called*, pp. 291-300, for a more critical but still sympathetic evaluation of Ezra and Nehemiah.

²⁴ See the opening paragraph of chapter 5 above.

both the everyday life-skills that make survival possible and in the capacity for far-reaching insight that makes it possible to understand the riddles of history.

In part they do that by utilizing the insights already expressed in their own scriptures, which provide key seed-thoughts and clues for both stories and visions in Daniel. Israel's own scriptures are a key resource in its theological school. The "sermons" in Chronicles, too, utilize earlier scriptures to suggest how Yahweh's word speaks today (e.g., 2 Chr 16:9; 20:20).²⁵ In Chronicles in general Israel does its theological thinking by reflecting in narrative form on questions raised by its current context, in light of historical, prophetic, and worship traditions. In Ruth and Esther it does this by telling a less complicated story, though here too aspects of these traditions make an important contribution to it: there is a markedly intertextual relationship between these stories and those of the Torah.²⁶

The Israel of the Writings is the Israel the New Testament presupposes. In its genealogical approach Matthew follows on from Chronicles. In its opening portrait of the worshipping community in the temple Luke does the same. In his parables Jesus invites both wise and simple into his theological school, and in their attempts to do theology the New Testament writers show that they themselves have learned from the Writings as well as from anywhere. In identifying "models for the church," the New Testament recycles the scriptures' images of Israel that we have considered.²⁷ We ought hardly to assume that it brought to the surface all there is to mine from this rich resource; further insights from which we may profit have been implicit or explicit in each of the sections above. Nor ought we to assume that the church has the right to assume that these images now belong exclusively to it. The Jewish people is still the people of Yahweh and these images continue to provide it with identity and challenge.

²⁵ See G. von Rad, "The Levitical Sermon in *I and II Chronicles*," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, pp. 267-80

²⁶ See, e.g., D. Nolan Fewell and D. M. Gunn, "'A Son Is Born to Naomi!'" *JSOT* 40 (1988): 103-7; G. Gerleman, *Esther* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1973), pp. 11-23; S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), pp. 6-8, 123-65, 174-77.

²⁷ See A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974/Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976, 1988; also P. S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960/London: Lutterworth, 1961).